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AUTHOR West, Suzanne E.
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ABSTRACT

This booklet discusses several topics related to friendships among children. Particular attention is given to the importance of children's friendships, the origin and development of friendships, adult influence on children's friendships, and ways adults can assist children in becoming friends. Adult intervention to end a friendship and ways to help children cope with the stress of losing a friendship are also discussed. Several photographs are included which illustrate children's friendships, as well as a list of suggested reading (for children). (RH)

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# Children's Friendships

by Suzanne E. West

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Many ideas in this publication come from Zick Rubin's useful book *Children's Friendships* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980).

"Let's be brothers and always live together."

"I'm not your friend. You can't come to my house."

"I love you so much I could squish you!"

**Are friendships important for children?**

If we listen to children, we cannot help realizing that they feel their friendships are very important. Making friends, playing with friends, fighting and making up, and sometimes even losing friends occupy a large portion of children's time and attention. Children's relationships with one another provide opportunities for learning that are different from those provided by parents and teachers.

Adults' relationships with children often are very warm and friendly, but they tend to focus on protecting and caring for the children and guiding them toward becoming more grown-up. Children think of adults as all-powerful and all-knowing, rather than as individuals with strengths and weaknesses. Because adults control resources that children want and approve or disapprove of their behavior, children try to gain adults' approval.

In relationships with their peers, children can make equal contributions and can participate in setting standards of behavior. They engage in discussion, shows of force, negotiation, and compromise to reach agreement in their play. Through these interactions, children discover ways they are alike and ways they are different from one another. They come to recognize that they are not equals in all ways, though they have much in common.

Friendships develop when children learn to respect their differences by cooperating for their mutual benefit. Children help a friend with the expectation that their friend will meet their needs. When differences are not respected and children ignore or take advantage of each other's needs, the relationship goes awry and the children find themselves in conflict. Efforts to restore the friendship, to recognize the other's needs and to make amends, often follow, though repeated conflicts can lead to the end of the friendship.

Through peer relationships and friendships, children learn what adults cannot teach them, namely:

*Social skills.* These include techniques for making and maintaining contact, for communicating effectively, and for dealing with conflicts. Adults can serve as useful advisers and models of these skills, but children need equals with whom to experiment and practice.

*Realistic awareness of themselves.* Children discover qualities about themselves—for example, their relative strength, speed, or skill—through comparing themselves with people about their own size and age. Adults can tell children about their qualities, but children draw their own conclusions through observation of and interaction with peers.

*The value of belonging and interdependence.* Casual peer relationships and friendships both involve reciprocation—"I do to you and you do to me"—but friendships also involve cooperation for each other's benefit—"I give to you and you give to me." Through these experiences of give and take, mutual trust can develop. Friends can count on each other. This trust allows children to develop a realistic acceptance of themselves. Through feeling accepted by their friends, children come to enjoy helping their friends in need. Children also learn to value themselves as persons who can *be* friends. It is much more difficult for children to experience themselves as strong and giving in relation to adults.

## How do friendships begin and develop?

Children less than a year old get visibly excited when they see other babies but often treat them as objects to explore, poke, or pull. They may be attracted by a toy a baby is holding and crawl over to take

the toy, showing little awareness of the other child's feelings. Near the end of their first year, children begin to look at one another more closely, to smile, make sounds, and offer toys to one another. They may also hit or bite another child in genuine anger. During the second year, toddlers who have frequent opportunities to be with children their age often try to attract one another's attention, to imitate, and even to take turns. Sharing is especially difficult for two-year-olds, who are temporarily very concerned with what is "mine." Some children show preferences for certain play partners, perhaps revealing the beginning of friendships based on similarities in tempo and interests. The development of spoken language in the third year adds complexity and richness to the children's interactions.

Preschool children, from about three to five years of age, are able to express some ideas about friendship. They usually view friends as momentary playmates, as persons who are physically accessible ("She lives in my building" or "He's in my car pool") or who act in pleasing ways ("He gives me turns on the bike" or "She doesn't hit me"). "We're friends" often means "We play together." Mutuality is not always necessary—"He's my friend because I like him" can be enough. Children of this age may have strong preferences and enduring relationships with peers, but they usually do not talk about the personalities of their friends or the experience of give and take.

Young children tend to see friendship as one-sided—in terms of what friends can do for them. Through interaction, children are confronted with how other children respond to their behavior. "If you knock my building down, you can't come to my birthday party" is a familiar message. In these experiences, children begin to be aware of their peers' likes and dislikes ("She won't play with me when I get so silly") and to moderate their behavior to please their preferred playmates. The concept of cooperation develops gradually as children engage in moments of working together to achieve a common goal—and find pleasure in their joint achievement. Sharing occurs spontaneously as children recognize that others have wants and needs too and choose to meet those needs and enjoy the warm feelings that result. Children begin to extend their experience of love within the family to selected playmates their own age, thus gradually maturing in their understanding of friendship.

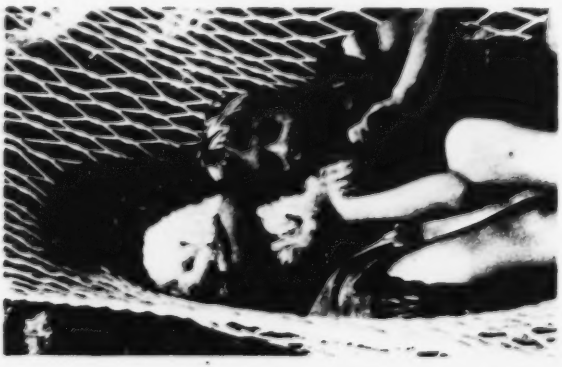
As children move up through the school years, they see one another as having psychological attributes as well as physical qualities. Increasingly, personality over the long term, rather than actions of the moment, becomes the basis for friendship. Children begin to see their friends as an enduring part of their social lives, rather than as playmates for as long as things go smoothly. They are able to make conscious efforts to repair a rift in the relationship because of their trust in its enduring quality.

These changes in understanding and behavior seem to come with mental development and with experience in relating to peers. There is wide variation among individual children in the ages when these changes occur. Even as adults, we may form friendships on the basis of companionship ("because she lives next door and likes to run in the evening, too"), acceptance ("because I can trust him to be there for me even after I tell him the stupid things I've done"), or complementary needs ("because she needs me to listen").

### Do adults influence children's friendships? Can they help?

Adults can support children's growth through friendships by understanding what these relationships mean to the individual child and by showing interest and encouragement. It is important to recognize and respect each child's differing social needs and style. Some children enjoy having many friends, while others prefer one "best friend." Many youngsters create imaginary friends who satisfy their social desires perfectly—for awhile. Children need privacy and solitude as well as friends, especially if they spend much time in group care. For children, as for adults, a large part of their "quality of life"—their happiness—is dependent on a reasonable match between their social needs and their social situation. Their sense of satisfaction over time is probably the best indication of the success of that match, even though there may be difficult moments day to day.

Parents and teachers can help children develop friends by being observant, listening to and accepting children's feelings about their relationships, and, if needed, arranging appropriate opportunities for peer interaction. Children vary in their ability to benefit from different kinds and sizes of groups. A shy or inexperienced child may be more at ease in a small group with fairly close adult supervision. Later on, that same child—or another child who showed more interest



in social activities early on—may thrive in a less structured setting with a broader variety of potential friends and the expectation of more independent peer interactions. Some children enter eagerly into the hurly-burly of informal neighborhood play, while others need more sheltered visits with one or two children. In the early years, when adults have the greatest opportunity to shape children's environments, they can encourage a variety of experiences—chances to interact with both boys and girls and with children of varying ages, cultures, and backgrounds—so that children can learn gradually to feel comfortable with others somewhat unlike themselves.

Although children learn the skills of making and maintaining friendships primarily through trial and error with one another, they sometimes need adults to help them get started. A young child may desperately want to play with another child but be too hesitant or too overpowering and be ignored or rebuffed. To give such a child the opportunity to develop social skills, an adult could suggest specific approaches:

"She doesn't want to play when you hit her with the ball. Try rolling it to her."

"He likes doing puzzles, too. You could ask him to help you find which piece fits in there."

"Would you like to ask her to go to the laundromat with us? We could get an ice cream cone and look at the fire engines next door while we're waiting for the wash to dry."

Adult involvement may be needed when the inevitable conflicts between children arise—if the children seem unable to work them out on their own. Children may need adults to stop physical violence, to hear and acknowledge their feelings, and to guide them in developing communication techniques that can help them maintain their play.

"You sound very mad. Can you *tell* him what you want? He can't understand when you scream at him."

"They won't let you play? Let's listen a minute and see what they're playing. Seems like they're getting ready to go on their boat. Do you suppose you could bring some fishing poles and ask them if they'd like to catch some big fish?"

Given such help, children often find their own ways of resolving conflict. Sometimes their solutions may not seem "fair" to adults, but, in most cases, the process of figuring out a satisfying arrangement is more important than meeting adult standards of fairness.

The skills children need to learn as they struggle to manage conflict vary depending on the personality of the child.

> The overly aggressive child . . . may need to learn how to listen to others without interrupting or putting them down, and how to accept reasonable disagreement gracefully without anger or attack. The overly submissive child, in turn, may have to learn how to stand up for himself with a definite posture and a calm tone of voice that communicates conviction.[1]

Children need other skills as they learn to "be friends," to cultivate continuing relationships with other children. Although initial attraction is often based on similarities, building more lasting bonds depends on being able to give others attention, appreciation, affection, and cooperation. Children learn these abilities by experiencing them, from being given attention, appreciation, affection, and cooperation in relationships with important people in their lives, such as parents, teachers, and older children. Children also absorb ideas about how to be a friend by observing adult interactions—how they communicate, listen, and solve problems.

Adults can value and support children's efforts to be friends by listening, with respect, to their delights and complaints about their social lives, by occasionally sharing their feelings about friendships, and by reading or suggesting stories about relationships between friends. For a child who is having a problem in a friendship, just knowing that he or she is not the only one who ever had this problem can help ease the pain and may clear the way to a resolution. Offering understanding of the child's feelings is more useful in the long run than attempting to figure out who is to blame or trying to solve the problem for the child.

As children grow older, they are more able to appreciate differences between themselves and their friends and to choose friends on the basis of complementary qualities. Psychologist Robert White writes, "In a friendship, each member can supply the other with something he lacks, at the same time serving as a model from whom the desirable quality can be copied."[2] Friendships provide valuable ingredients for psychological growth toward a balanced personality.

At times, parents or teachers may worry about the effects of a friendship they feel is damaging a child. Children usually are drawn to each other for a reason, though they may not be able to express it in words. Children need to "become themselves," to develop as unique persons, and may "use" friendships to experiment and explore new ways of being. When children are going through periods of rapid change, they often have a variety of intense but short-lived friendships that mirror their changing needs and sense of self. Adults might want to observe these relationships carefully before taking action. Parents can arrange for their child to be with friends in the home. If the children behave in ways the parents cannot approve, the first step might be to talk with the children about the behavior, rather than assuming that the friendship is at fault. Children often need help in strengthening their own codes of behavior.

Occasionally, adult intervention to end a relationship is justified. Parents have the responsibility to protect and guide their children according to their best understanding of what is good for them. Intervention is likely to be least damaging to the parent-child relationship if the parent acknowledges the basis of the action ("I believe this is very important and will be best for you, even though I am sorry to do it and know that you may feel hurt and angry"). Communicating genuine caring, rather than a need for power or control, can help the child accept the parents' action. Supporting the child's efforts to renew or develop other interests and to move toward more acceptable relationships is equally important.

Losing friends can be a stressful experience for children, as it is for adults. It is a time when children need understanding and patience.

They may feel lonely, depressed, irritable, and angry. When the loss occurs because of a family move or a change to a different school or day-care program, the children have little control over the situation. They are called upon to make the best of the situation without their former companions. To help children through such changes, parents need to listen to the child and express appreciation of the importance of the friendships. Some children can see a change as an opportunity to pursue new interests or make new friends; they benefit from encouragement to reach out. Others focus on maintaining former ties and may need help in writing, calling, or visiting old friends.

Children often end their friendships because they are maturing at different rates and in different ways than their friends. One child may make a new friend or seek ways out of a relationship while the other child still wants to be close. Children experience hurt, anger, loneliness, and guilt in these break-ups. Rejection is almost always painful to both parties. Helping children to understand how their changing interests or styles contribute to the separation may ease the distress and enable them to become more sensitive and aware in future relationships.

Whether the loss of a friendship is from physical or psychological separation, within or beyond the child's control, it is usually a major hurdle in a child's life. Children's feelings are strong and real; they need to be heard and accepted as important. Although the children must experience the pain of the loss, knowing that adults understand, care, and sympathize can free them from dwelling on their problems, thus allowing them to view the situation more objectively and to grow through the experience. Stories and books are useful too as children struggle to understand and adapt.

Children and adults are very much alike in their social and emotional needs. We all want to be loved and accepted. We all experience the same range of emotions, including fear, anger, compassion, and joy. As adults who are helping children to develop their humanness through their relationships with other children, we can always turn to our own experiences for guidance. We might ask ourselves: What have various friendships meant to me? What did I want in those relationships? What were my feelings about losing a friend? From these reflections, we can get in touch with the importance of friendships. Then we can listen with an open heart to our children's experiences and help them grow in their own ways through their friendships.

**Notes**

1. Cited in Zick Rubin, *Children's Friendships* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 55.

2. Robert W. White, *The Enterprise of Living: Growth and Organization in Personality* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1972), p. 304.

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Many books by Judy Blume, Beverly Cleary, and Marjorie Weinman Sharmot deal with children's friendships.



Suzanne E. West is director of the Cornell Nursery School and a lecturer in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies.

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